



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Under the governmental system prevailing in France before the Revolution, the king united in his person all powers in the State, judicial and legislative as well as executive. That he alone held these powers, and that he exercised them by divine right, was not only believed by himself, but may be said to have been an article of religion supported by all the authority of the Church. Politics was, then, a sacred domain on which none of the king's subjects might trespass, and all government and administration was a mystery carefully veiled from the eyes of the public. So true was this that not even in purely local and parish affairs were the French people entrusted with any discretionary powers whatsoever. Yet there have been paternal and autocratic governments in history, under which the individual enjoyed much freedom from illegal and arbitrary interference, thanks to an admirable judicial administration based on one great common system of law and procedure the same for all. Under such an administration the forms of the law are the equivalent of liberty itself. Such was the judicial system of Imperial Rome, or of England under the Tudors. But in France there was no such Common Law. There was a government of *men*, that is an arbitrary government, and not a government of *law*. It was a state in which all depended on one-man power and on one-man judgment, that is on the king, and when the king himself ceased to devote his days and nights to the service of the State, as Louis XVI had ceased to do, the administration fell into disorder. But the Old Régime was insolvent, as well as inefficient, and bankruptcy will bring any government to its knees. Accordingly Louis XVI and his ministers, seeing the impossibility of further borrowing, were forced to summon that old feudal assembly of the three classes of the nation, the Estates General, and thus to concede to the French people a share in politics, a domain from which they had hitherto been so jealously excluded. On the 14th July, 1789, came the final struggle between the National Assembly, as the Estates General soon called themselves, and the Crown and Court

party. As a result of that struggle the divine right doctrine was blown to the winds, and it was shown that if the king was to retain his popularity—which was still very great—he must consent to a monarchy limited by a popular assembly, if not to a royal democracy. On the 14th July the old royal administration, fallen into universal contempt, came down with a crash, yet there was no strong guiding hand—no Frederick II, no Napoleon—to interpose, and the French people, bereft of a leader in a great crisis, childlike in their ignorance and in their inexperience in government, had sovereignty, as it were, suddenly thrust upon them.

What was the state of mind of the people-sovereign? What were the chief political passions that swayed it in the exercise of its newly found power? To answer these questions, in some measure at least, is the purpose of this paper.

From a study of the newspapers and pamphlets of the day, as well as of the memoirs of contemporaries, three political traits seem to loom most prominently, or at any rate, most characteristically, during the administrative anarchy of the first year of the Revolution. These are, first, the enthusiasm of the French people for the liberty they had just won, and a glowing hope in the future; second, a veritable craze for civil and political, if not for social, equality; and, third, an intolerance in politics that would brook no opposition and would permit no freedom of political opinion.

These characteristics will now be taken up in the order named, and, first the enthusiasm that spread over France after the fall of the Bastille, 14th July, 1789.

Count de Ségur tells us in his memoirs¹ that he returned to France towards the end of the year 1789, after an absence of five years from his native country. He compares himself to old Epimenides—we would say Rip Van Winkle—waking up after his long sleep. Five years previously he had parted from a peaceful people, bent under the yoke of unquestioning obedience to the king's officials or to the lord of the manor. But now on recrossing the frontier, and before he had even exchanged a

¹ Comte de Ségur, *Mémoires*, II, 196. Paris, 1859.

word with anyone, Ségur marvelled, as he journeyed along the road, at meeting peasants, day laborers, and even women, who, in their looks and bearing as well as in their animated gestures, showed a high-spirited independence of manner such as he had never before perceived. Then, when our aristocratic traveller had occasion to speak to anyone of the lower classes, the man, instead of standing humbly, hat in hand, replied with proud bearing and in bold tones. Another traveller, Joachim Heinrich Campe, a Brunswick publicist and man of letters, who entered France from the Austro-Belgian frontier with two fellow Germans in August, 1789, bears witness to the same effect:² "How can I describe all those happy faces beaming with pride?" he writes. "I wanted to clasp in my arms the first persons I met." Everyone, bourgeois and peasants, old men and children, priests and beggars, was wearing the tricolor cockade, the symbol of reconquered liberty. If the rosette of red, white, and blue ribbons had not yet made its way around the world, it had at least made its way around France, and Campe and his two fellow Germans would have been objects of suspicion, had not a young citizeness, a dressmaker by trade, pinned a cockade to each of their hats right in the streets at Valenciennes, the first large town through which they passed.

Both Campe and Ségur were struck with the unceasing roll of drums in every town, and with the great number of men who were arming themselves and parading in militia companies through the streets. Everywhere there was a hum of excitement in the air, everywhere people seemed intoxicated with the new sensation of liberty. Campe's cockade worked like a charm on his own spirits. His German self with his racial prejudice had vanished, and he felt he was a brother to the French nation, and even ready to storm Bastilles. Yet, as he journeyed on towards Paris, our German idealist was repeatedly brought from the empyrean to earth again by "the unfortunate habit," as he tells us, of the waiters and chambermaids standing in front of his coach just as he was leaving an inn. Then the maid would throw a curtesy with "Monsieur, remember the girl," and when

² See *La Révolution Française*, LVIII, 31 ff.

she had been appeased the waiter would put in with "Monsieur, don't forget the boy."

The universal joy and hopefulness that reigned in those first months of the Revolution have likewise been recorded by Wordsworth, then a young Cambridge undergraduate. He had landed with a fellow-student at Calais in July, 1790, and later in a sonnet³ he records his impressions:—

A homeless sound of joy was in the sky;
The antiquated Earth (as one might say)
Beat like the heart of man: songs, garlands, flags,
Banners and happy faces, far and nigh.

And elsewhere, as is well known, Wordsworth has said:—

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven.

The disenchantment of later days only served to accentuate the first fond hopes at the opening of the Revolution. This sentiment is well voiced by Levasseur, the ex-member of the Convention, when writing his memoirs more than a generation afterwards. He thus recalls the memories of those early days: "One common feeling filled every head and heart: that the Nation had cast off its shackles, that humanity had regained its dignity. . . . And now," he continues, "though forty years have passed, those memories still haunt me radiant with their bright fleeting illusions; nor can I think of the clouds that came to blot out those days that were so bright, without my eyes instantly filling with bitter tears."⁴

The second great characteristic trait of Frenchmen at the dawn of the Revolution was their passion for equality. Popular sovereignty and hatred of privilege early brought to the fore the word "citizen" as the designation for all classes of men alike. Those arch-politicians, the beggars and shoeblacks in the streets of Paris, were quick to perceive this. Before the Revolution they had sought to flatter passers-by and extract from them a few coppers by conferring such titles as "Your Highness," "My Lord," "Marquis," "General." Now, on the other hand, they

³ Emile Legouis, *La Jeunesse de William Wordsworth*, 112. Paris, 1896.

⁴ R. Levasseur, *Mémoires*, I, 28-29. Paris, 1829.

sought to ingratiate themselves by calling out "Please, a little alms, my good fellow-citizens!" "Let me shine 'em up, my dear fellow-citizen!"⁵

It will be remembered that, as Ségur and Campe had remarked, all France had taken to soldiering. And nowhere was the prevailing craze for liberty and equality more strikingly exemplified than in the rules and regulations drawn up about this time for the conduct and discipline of the various militia corps. These early codes of discipline persuade and exhort to obedience rather than command it. Not infrequently they are preceded by preambles, in which the right of 'citizens' to obey only officers elected by themselves is dwelt upon; frequent rotation in military office is advocated; and the subordination of the soldier to his officers is represented as a necessary evil, to which it is confidently expected the rank and file will submit, when the reasons for it are explained to them. Thus the administrative authorities of the city of Dijon⁶ in drawing up "police regulations," as they were named, for their citizen guard, call attention in a preamble to the basic principles which should underlie all such codes. Military force (the preamble gravely states), if it were divided, would not be strong. Hence a militia must have officers. But subordination to them "will imply nothing humiliating, for one does not obey such and such an individual, but public authority itself."⁷ At Lisieux, a little town in Normandy, it seems that the officers of the local militia were too fond of continuing in office. This holding over in authority was resented, we are told, by the citizens of Lisieux, who "have keenly felt this encroachment upon their liberty." Thereupon a new militia code was issued in September, 1789, which starts out with the assertion that "civil and political equality is one of the first rights of man in society." Then it proceeds to deduce from this axiom the conclusion that frequent rotation in military office is indispensable for the maintenance of liberty. The code further enacts that for the future officers

⁵*Journal de la Mode et du Goût* (Le Brun), 5 March, 1790.

⁶The ancient capital of the dukes of Burgundy.

⁷*Règlement de police pour la garde citoyenne de la ville de Dijon*. Dijon, 1789.

must stand for reëlection every three months. If those actually holding office fear such a test, they thereby seek to create "an humiliating prejudice against that numerous class of inhabitants worthy by rank and merit to become officers in their turn, yet condemned to remain under the command of others, if excluded from office contrary to justice and political equality." We are not surprised, after this preamble, to find in article 13 of the Code the injunction: "Messieurs the company officers are requested to learn the elements of drill in order to teach their commands and give their orders."⁸ When requested by the editors of a contemporary year-book on the French National Guards to send a list of their officers for publication, the militia of Rennes (the former capital of Brittany) refused, giving as their reason that "all inhabitants, without distinction of rank, who are worthy of the honorable title of citizen, having all equally contributed to the happy and honorable revolution, have an equal claim to public distinction, and deserve, all of them, to have their names incised on a list [the year-book in question] destined to make known those Frenchmen who have conquered, and who now protect, the public liberties."⁹

But the devotion to equality was wounded most deeply in military matters by the introduction of "crack companies." In the old regular army in each battalion of six companies there was a company of grenadiers, comprising the tallest men, who marched in front, and a company of chasseurs who brought up the rear. These two were called the "crack companies." The creation of grenadier and chasseur companies proved to be a veritable apple of discord thrown among the ranks of the national guards. Baron Thiébault, himself a Paris national guardsman, tells us that General Lafayette, being desirous of raising a select body of volunteers ready for any service, in or out of Paris, by day or by night, hit on the idea of these "crack companies" to do such extra work, which the ordinary guardsman would not consent to do. When the new companies of grenadiers and

⁸ *Règlement provisoire pour le service et discipline de la milice nationale de Lisieux*. National Library, Paris.

⁹ *Etat Militaire de la garde nationale de France pour l'année 1790*, II, 87-90. Paris [1790].

chasseurs, with their distinguishing insignia of grenades and hunting horns respectively, appeared among their less-favored fellow militiamen, the innovation was denounced as "an outrage on equality and the forming of an aristocracy."¹⁰ "What are grenadiers?" exclaimed Tournon in his newspaper, the *Révolutions de Paris*.¹¹ "They are men who wish to be conspicuous citizens, that is something more than a citizen. . . . Aristocracy is so very, very dangerous a disease that it infects almost always the best citizens." These dissensions and pretensions, brought about by the differences in uniforms and in epaulets, caused Camille Desmoulins to write in his newspaper that uniforms were dangerous to liberty.¹²

As at Paris so in the provinces. At Montpellier, where grenadiers and chasseurs had been fighting for precedence, the solons of the municipal government decreed that one company should wear the united insignia of both grenadiers and chasseurs in order to make them keep the peace;¹³ and at Melun (near Paris) the municipal council decided that the town companies should draw lots as to which company should march first.¹⁴ One more typical and amusing example of the equality craze may be cited before the subject is dismissed. At Corbeil (a few miles south of Paris) the national guards of the surrounding towns had come together, in June, 1790, to fraternize and confederate. One of these national guardsmen, desirous of cutting as fine a figure as possible, had invested in a pair of lace cuffs, which he rather ostentatiously paraded among his comrades of the same company. They strenuously objected to the lace cuffs on the ground that it was a distinction in dress which they could not themselves indulge in, and that it wounded the sentiment of equality. A heated discussion ensued, which was only settled at last by a superior officer, who assured the pretentious soldier that wearing lace cuffs with a regulation uniform was an unconstitutional proceeding.¹⁵

¹⁰ Thiébaud, *Mémoires*, I, 233 ff. Paris, 1893.

¹¹ Number of 29 November, 1789.

¹² *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, 6 April, 1790.

¹³ C. d'Aigrefeuille, *Histoire de la ville de Montpellier*, IV, 385-6. Montpellier, 1882.

¹⁴ *Journal du Département de Seine et Marne*, 16 June, 1790.

¹⁵ *Affiches de Dauphiné* (Grenoble paper), 21 June, 1790.

Lastly we come to the third great characteristic of the times: political intolerance. Mr. Lecky, in his *History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, says that in France politics partake of the nature of war: you must crush your adversary or be crushed by him. Certainly the assertion would not hold good of the France of to-day nor of any other civilized nation. Our long practice of self-government has made us very skeptical as to the efficacy of mere political programmes, even when embodied in legislation. *Quid leges sine moribus?* Yet the Frenchmen of 1789 were perfectly logical, if once we accept their premises, viz., that man's nature was like putty in the hands of the State, and might be moulded at will through State regulation. "What" (says Rousseau in substance in his *Social Contract*), "you will not join in our regenerated society! Then we will *compel* you to be free, we will *compel* you to be happy . . . !" To seize the law-making and administrative powers, to keep out political antagonists, as we would keep heretics from the fold of the Church, because of their infinite capacity to harm the State, such was the political creed of nearly every Frenchman of the time. Who can be tolerant if he believes that his political opponent may ruin the country and society itself? Yet what was the Frenchman of 1789 but the Frenchman of 1788, the Frenchman of the Old Régime with his superstitious awe for the power wielded by the State, formerly incorporated in the person of the king, but now identified with himself. Yes, he and his fellow-party men—*they* are the State. Had not Frenchmen always looked to the State to dictate to them what to think, how to act, what to believe? "All is referred to your Majesty," once wrote Turgot. "You are obliged to decide everything by yourself, or by your immediate agents. Men await your special orders, not only to manage the affairs of the State, but even to attend to their own business." Notwithstanding the chorus of approval that hailed the opening year of the Revolution, there were liberals other than Edmund Burke, even several months before his famous "Reflections" appeared,¹⁶ who despaired of the success of the Revolution because of the political unripeness of the French.

¹⁶ They were published in November, 1790.

One of these was the Swiss traveller Johann George Fisch, whose book, *Letters About the Southern Provinces of France*,¹⁷ was written from 1786 to 1788, and published early in 1790. In a postscript to the book, written in March, 1790, Fisch asks himself the question, Should he now publish this book, composed before such great and important changes had come over France, changes so momentous that the free nation in many respects no longer resembles the other "dishonored by despotism"? Would the words written of the Frenchmen of 1788 still apply to the French of 1790? Fisch thinks they would. No nation, he believes, can be born anew, and slough off like a skin the spirit, manners, and customs of the people. Frenchmen had always attached a deep veneration to all who exercised authority in the king's name. As an example of this bowing down to the official, rather than to the law, Fisch cites a case which came under his own observation. During a theatrical performance in a town in Southern France, certain young fellows, wearied at a long delay between the acts, had, in a merry mood, improvised a dance in the theatre. Some one, annoyed by the performance, complained to the governor of the province. That worthy caused the youthful offenders to be imprisoned for six weeks in underground dungeons so damp that the prisoners became cripples for life. Yet, nowhere, not even in the most enlightened circles, could Fisch find anyone to condemn this sentence. Nor could anyone even understand Fisch's own contention that no regard had been shown for legal rights, no proportion observed between offence and punishment. He was answered that they had been guilty of *lèse-majesté* in continuing after warning. Surely, concluded our Swiss liberal, men with such opinions are not yet ripe for liberty. Another contemporary, the lyric poet André Chénier wrote in August, 1790, a pamphlet entitled "Who are the Real Enemies of the French People?"¹⁸ In this the great poet, who proves himself a great citizen as well, points out with admirable insight that the French people was its own worst enemy, and had simply replaced the despotic and

¹⁷*Briefe über die Südlichen Provinzen Frankreichs* Zürich, 1790.

¹⁸"Avis au Peuple français sur ses véritables ennemis." (No place, nor printer.) National Library, Paris.

arbitrary methods of the king's officials by those of its own elected representatives. Why, asks Chénier, do so many innocent French émigrés continue their wanderings in foreign lands without ties, without friends or relatives, the butt of curiosity or of humiliating pity? Why are they afraid to reënter France?¹⁹ They are afraid because letter after letter from their relatives and friends who have remained at home tells them of house to house searches, more annoying by far to the innocent than terrifying to the guilty; of desks broken open and private papers and family secrets violated and laid bare to the world; of innocent people haled before officials and compelled to undergo interminable cross-questionings; of all France living in an atmosphere of suspicion and tale-bearing; of mobs who persist in putting themselves in the places of the magistrates, and who seem to take a sort of pleasure in dealing out the sentence of death. "Instead of that freedom of thought engraved in indestructible characters in nature's code," wrote an officer in the Grenoble National Guard in April, 1790, "we have had during the last few months an odious inquisition: never was more lip-service paid to the principle itself [liberty of opinion] yet never was there more shocking intolerance."²⁰

In conclusion, it may be said that the chief lesson conveyed to us by the beginnings of the French Revolution is that the road to political liberty is long and hard. Men could not cast off the shackles of the Old Régime and proclaim, "Let there be liberty!" as God had said, "Let there be light!" It requires a long apprenticeship for the freedman to acquire the virtues and the self-restraint—the soul, in fact—of the free man. To understand the men of the Revolution, one must begin by understanding the men of the Old Régime.

SEDLEY LYNCH WARE.

University of the South.

¹⁹ The reader should be reminded that as yet no harsh laws had been passed against the émigrés.

²⁰ Pamphlet in *Bib. Hist. de la Ville de Paris*, signed Allemand-Dulauron. Shelf number 60,3910.